

FarmJournal's

PORK

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March/April 2024

Barn Heroes: For the
Sake of Pig Care page 10

Unleash Genetic Potential
Through Management page 30

Focus on the Basics

*What's the superpower swine
farms need right now?*

page 6

2020

2023

Total Born
Average

14.7

15.3 PIGS

Total Weaned
Per Female

25.1

25.8 PIGS



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FARM JOURNAL



Publisher's statement: Pork (ISSN 25726765) publishes eight times a year in January/February, March/April, May, June, July/August, September, October and November/December, by Farm Journal, 1600 Market Street, Suite 1530, Philadelphia, PA 19103. © Copyright 2024 Farm Journal. All rights reserved. To subscribe or change a subscription address, call (800) 331-9310 or email: customerservice@farmjournal.com. Farm Journal, Attn: Customer Service, 820 James Street, Webster City, IA 50595. Subscription rates: U.S., \$50 per year; all other countries, \$65 per year surface or \$100 air mail. Single copy: \$10 each. Periodicals postage paid at Philadelphia, Pa., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to PORK, 820 James Street, Webster City, IA 50595.

Let's Be Honest

Embarrassing. Disappointing. Not something to be proud of. No one wants to share news like that. Yet, while listening to some of the brightest minds discuss hard topics such as sow mortality and porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome, I am reminded change won't happen unless we get honest with ourselves.

The pork industry has made many amazing advancements. However, challenging markets, loss of domestic demand, a shrinking labor pool, foreign animal disease threats and more make raising pigs today hard.

ARE WE WINNING ON ALL FRONTS?

I've always been told when you hear a message repeated, it's worth a little discussion. At the Ohio Pork Congress, Pipestone veterinarian Cara Haden said the U.S. currently has the worst finishing mortality of any of the major swine-producing countries.

"We need to take that very seriously. Being dead last in the world for finishing mortality is not something the U.S. swine industry should be proud of," Haden says in a story [starting on page 16](#).

During the American Association of Swine Veterinarians annual meeting, Amy Maschhoff, director of health and animal care at The Maschhoffs, shared similar sentiments.

"The U.S. pork industry may be standing on the podium for overall profitability according to previous research, but I think we need to ask ourselves if we are winning on all fronts. For someone who cares about animal health and welfare, our mortality problem is frankly embarrassing," Maschhoff says.

In 2023, grow-finish mortality reached an all-time high, around 7.61%, according to MetaFarms data. Sow mortality hit an all-time high of 15.3%, explains Brad Eckberg, a

business analyst at MetaFarms, Inc., in a story [starting on page 6](#).

It would be nice if there was one change that could fix this problem, but we know it's not that simple. Eckberg believes one of the best ways to improve mortality on the farm is to focus on animal husbandry.

PASSIONATE ABOUT PIGS

Not only is it the right thing to do for the animal, but science shows how improving animal husbandry improves animal performance and profitability. I've always been drawn to people who love animals. We need to find and develop more people who are passionate about animals. I am excited to share our newest series in this issue, "Barn Heroes."

[Turn to page 10](#) to learn how Summer Doty earned the title of barn hero for her contributions at Islercrest Farms.

"Our No. 1 goal on our farm is always to take the best care possible of our animals," says co-owner Nathan Isler. "A person who excels at doing this, who can identify and put an animal's needs above all else, is a barn hero."

I can't wait to uncover more stories of real heroes in the barn — employees who go above and beyond for the sake of the pig. I don't know what celebrating the people who work hard in our barns will result in, but I know it's worth talking about more.

Averages don't always show just how good our top farms are when it comes to reducing mortality. We have reason to be optimistic because great improvement is happening, but we need to have hard conversations and be realistic, too. 🐷



Jennifer

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Focus on the Basics

The superpower swine farms need now.



22 If You've Got It, Flaunt It

Meet the Winners of the Best Beards in the Pork Industry Contest



32 Focus on Retention

Employers Pivot to Keep Top Talent on the Farm

- 3 **On My Mind:**
Let's Be Honest
- 10 **Barn Heroes:**
For the Sake of Pig Care
- 14 Unlock Profit Potential:
A Road Map for Pork Industry Resurgence
- 16 We Can't Ignore the Real Costs of PRRS Any Longer
- 20 Subpopulations: Hidden Pockets of Value
- 24 Focus on Nutrition for Summer Marketing
- 26 How Do You Chew?
- 28 **PORK Perspectives:**
Kale Causemaker
- 30 Unleash Genetic Potential Through Management
- 33 Whose Team Are They On?
- 35 Postweaning Scours: No One-Size-Fits-All Solution
- 36 Embracing Our Differences for Strength
- 38 **Bacon Bits**



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SCAN FOR
DETAILS



THE SUPERPOWER SWINE FARMS NEED NOW

By Jennifer Shike

Is the ability to focus on the farm a superpower? It might be. In today's modern pork production systems, the amount of data available combined with the number of challenges coming from all directions makes the concept of focus easier said than done.

Brad Eckberg, business analyst at MetaFarms, Inc., spends a lot of time evaluating data, talking to producers and visiting pork production systems around the country. He believes the difference between systems that are performing well and those that are not comes down to focus — specifically in the dollars to dimes.

“Those companies that are exceeding have their foot on the gas pedal every single day, all the time. They are really locked into data,” Eckberg says.

It's easy to get in the weeds of day-to-day pork production, which leaves little time to analyze on-farm data. But Eckberg says monitoring data on a frequent basis is key.

“You don't know what you don't measure,” he points out. “Producers need to be able to say, ‘Here is where we're at, here is where we want to be as a goal for an improvement.’”

A LOOK BACK AT 2023

Looking at the MetaFarms numbers for 2023, Eckberg notes several areas of improvement throughout the pork

industry, but also areas of opportunity. On a bright note, feed costs have gone down. Nursery mortality has also improved. In 2023, it averaged 3.99% as compared to 4.41% in 2022.

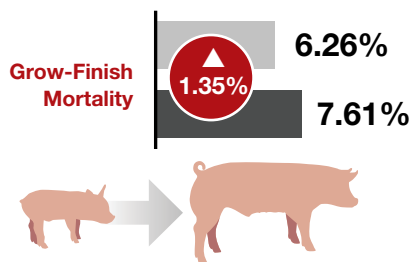
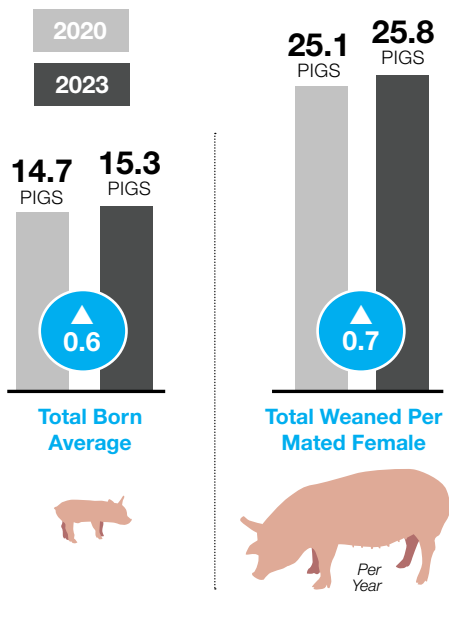
On the sow side, productivity continues to go up. The average in their database is 25.8 pigs weaned per mated female per year. In 2022, it was 25.6 pigs, which was unchanged from 2021 and up from 2020 at 25.1 pigs.

“The gold bar standard for sow farms would be pigs weaned per mated female per year, which looks at how efficient sows are at producing weaned



FARM JOURNAL
SMART FARMING

MetaFarms Numbers



pigs,” he explains. “The 2023 average continues to increase and will be the fourth year in a row it’s increased.”

Total born averages continue to increase, too. Eckberg says this can be attributed to genetic improvements. In 2023, the total born average was 15.3 pigs. In 2022, the industry was at 15.0 pigs as compared to 14.8 pigs in 2021 and 14.7 pigs in 2020.

A number that has flatlined across the database and could use improvement is prewean mortality. 2023 will likely close out about 14.4% compared to 14.3% in 2022, 14.1% in 2021, and 14.5% in 2020.

“Finishing mortality was iffy,” Eckberg says. “It hit an all-time high in 2022 at 5.31%. It was unchanged in 2023.”

How to Reduce Wean-to-Finish Mortality

Brad Eckberg, business analyst at MetaFarms, Inc., says it comes down to focus and prioritization. Using his experience working as a service technician and analyzing data from over 11 million single-stocked wean-to-finish pigs in 4,000 groups last year, here are a few tips to reduce wean-to-finish mortality.

START PIGS OUT RIGHT.

Is the barn clean? “It’s easy to get overlooked. Make sure you have a dry environment with no drafts, too; pigs are difficult,” Eckberg says. “If something’s not right, if they don’t have the right feed or the water cup is not cleaned out, they’re going to get sick.” The challenge is you can never make up that performance difference from an average daily gain perspective. Obviously, if a pig is not eating, it’s not growing. If it’s not eating and growing, it’s going the wrong way, he says.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE DECISIONS.

Technology with smart controllers helps ensure proper ventilation, heat and water usage, to name a few. “You can tell 24 to 48 hours in advance before pigs are going to get sick if the water usage is down, but are we tracking it? And who’s tracking it?” Eckberg asks. From the grower to the caretaker to the site supervisor to the general manager, communication must be a priority. Next, solidify the standard operating procedures you have in case something comes up.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE DECISIONS.

It’s simple, but seeing every pig every day is critical, Eckberg says. The caretaker is there every day to ensure that pig has proper feed, water, air and treatments. “It’s not just ‘seeing’ each pig, it’s about taking three to four seconds to be able to look for any issues,” he says. “Is there a joint issue? Are they favoring a leg? When do I treat a pig? When do I pull a pig?” It takes time to learn how to be observant. Spending time in the barns and really understanding what the pig needs is key.



Tips to Address Sow Death Loss

The latest MetaFarms reports show sow death loss in 2023 was at an all-time high at 15.3%. That's up 1% from a year ago — a trend that continues to move in the wrong direction. Although there isn't a magic bullet, experts say animal husbandry needs to be the No. 1 focus.

IDENTIFY TROUBLED ANIMALS.

Make sure staff are properly trained to identify troubled animals. In a recent National Pork Board and Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research survivability project (pigliability.org), researchers demonstrated the value of making sure someone flags at-risk sows daily during feeding time and ensuring they are properly treated, says Chris Rademacher, DVM, clinical professor and associate director of the Pork Industry Center. "This has shown a repeatable significant decrease in mortality when executed properly," Rademacher adds.

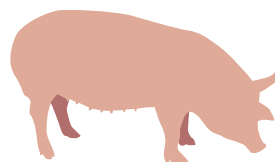
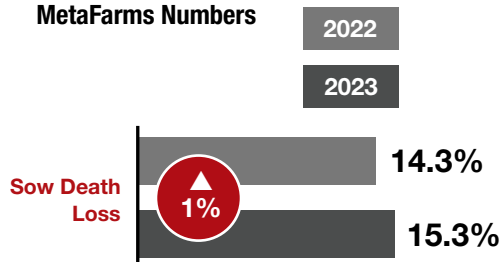
Science continues to affirm that improving animal husbandry improves animal performance and profitability. It's challenging, however, when labor turns over frequently and farms struggle to fill positions.

PRIORITIZE GILT DEVELOPMENT.

Never forget the importance of gilts on the farm. Gilts are the foundation. Although that's not an earth-shattering statement, Eckberg says how you handle your gilts is ultimately going to determine your long-term success on the sow farm. That means spending extra attention developing gilts will pay off in the end.

"For example, studies show capturing at least one heat, no-service on an animal will drastically improve your P-1 and lifetime performance," he says. He recently looked at the low number of heat, no-service gilts entered into the MetaFarms database in 2021. Over 60% of the gilts entered did not have a heat, no-service. That's about 250,000 gilts that did not have a recorded heat, no-service. "If you're not capturing that information within your record-keeping platform, how do you really know?" Eckberg asks. "It's by way of the Stone Age a little bit with pen and a piece of paper. Having that information at our fingertips by using a platform to track that information makes a difference."

MetaFarms Numbers



MORTALITY CHALLENGES

In 2023, grow-finish mortality reached an all-time high, around 7.61%, up from 6.87% in 2022, 6.79% in 2021 and 6.26% in 2020.

But there's no question the most alarming statistic for the pork industry continues to be sow death loss.

"We are going to close out 2023 with an all-time high in sow death loss in our platform at 15.3%," Eckberg says. "In 2022, it was 14.3%. This is one of the largest increases in our history."

Chris Rademacher, associate director of the Pork Industry Center, believes it's partly due to more movement toward open pen gestation and Proposition 12 compliant housing.

"Sows are socially hierarchal animals, and when mixed, will fight to establish social order. This may result in increased lameness and injuries requiring euthanization if they don't respond to treatment," he says. "We have not genetically selected sows that will thrive in an open pen environment, but as we make adjustments, we will benefit from those changes."

A GUT FEELING ISN'T ENOUGH

"Producers who are focused, paying attention and using data to make decisions are thriving despite uncontrollable circumstances," Eckberg says.

Data alone can't answer the hard questions, but it can provide insight.



LEARN MORE



CUMULATIVE PIGS WEANED

“Cumulative pigs weaned helps us answer these important questions: What is our breed target? Are we meeting breed targets? How are we tracking them? Each sow farm has a targeted number based on multiple factors. There can be harmful outcomes when this total is either short or long of the targeted goal.”

STILLBORNS

“Stillborns have a direct impact on piglets weaned. Farms should be tracking the number and percentage of stillborns daily. If you know more sows are coming up due to farrow, plan to have more staff to monitor farrowings and day one care. The best operations prioritize labor by identifying those fundamentals.”

NON-PRODUCTIVE DAYS

“Each day an animal is not productive costs the farm. Farms with high non-productive days often see animals that were not properly bred or pregnancy checked and found to be open as late as when that animal was due to farrow. This core metric is something every farm can improve with training.”

SOW DEATH LOSS

“It’s important to know who, when and why. Who helps determine the status and parity of the animal at time of death. When is the animal dying? Is it at farrowing or mid- to late-gestation? The why is equally important. Without understanding why animals are dying, how do we know how to save that animal?”

PAY ATTENTION TO THESE KEY METRICS

from Brad Eckberg

INDIVIDUAL SOW & PIGLET TREATMENTS

“Track individual sow and piglet treatments. Understanding why an animal is sick and utilizing your veterinarian-driven standard operating procedures will have the best outcome for the animal. A simple yet powerful message to any caretaker should be to see every pig every day.”

GROW-FINISH MORTALITY

“Monitoring death losses across your farms is an absolute must. It is important to not only know which sites are losing pigs and how many, but it is also important to understand why the losses are occurring. Are the losses coming from general-population pigs? Are those hospital-treated pigs?”

WATER USAGE MONITORING

“Did you know the first sign that a pig is sick is when it stops drinking? Monitoring daily water consumption and comparing it to the most current consumption can spur faster action by the caretaker. There are many sites with barn controllers that will not only collect the consumption but will alert about a possible issue.”

MARKETING FULL VALUE PIGS

“For producers who sell to a packer, the goal is to sell as many pigs possible at the right weight. Identifying the right pigs to sell is truly an art. Tools and predictive software models can help identify a pig’s weight and girth measurements as well as cumulative feed consumed per head.”

“If you’re relying on your gut or your employee’s, how can you remember all that information to make the best decisions? We can’t put as much onus on one person to do that,” he adds.

He says that’s the advantage to having data at your fingertips.

“Workers are in the barn, with that sow, putting the data in,” Eckberg says. “It’s updated in reports, and they can access scheduled reports instantly.” 🐷



READ MORE

Scan to learn more about using data to help make decisions on your swine farm.

Editor’s Note: The numbers shared in this story are preliminary 2023 numbers. The 2023 MetaFarms database represents 1.1 million sows from 460 farms as well as 24 million nursery pigs started and about 11 million single-stocked wean-to-finish pigs in 4,000 groups. As data flows in, updated numbers will be released from MetaFarms. MetaFarms does not release information on its customers, and it follows strict benchmarking rules about what data is included in reports.

For the Sake of Pig Care

By Jennifer Shike

Summer Doty hasn't saved anyone from a burning building or led an army into battle. She hasn't jumped into the path of an oncoming train or dismantled a bomb. Still, the work she does day in and day out at Islercrest Farms is proof that not all heroes wear capes.

Experts offer different definitions of heroism, but most agree it involves putting others first without the expectation of reward. That's why Nathan Isler, co-owner of Islercrest Farms in Prospect, Ohio, believes Doty defines what it means to be a barn hero.

"Our No. 1 goal on our farm is always to take the best care possible of our animals. A person who excels at doing this, who can identify and put an animal's needs above all else, is a barn hero," Isler says.

It wasn't a hard decision to hire Doty after she completed her animal science degree at Wilmington College in 2021. After searching the job board at school, she applied for a farrowing manager position at Islercrest.

Growing up on a family farm near Mingo, Ohio, Doty has been around

animals her entire life. She began raising her own showpigs in seventh grade. Although, they never had more than six sows on the farm at a time, she says that number suited her family just fine. It allowed them to raise their own pigs to show while gaining valuable experience managing a small herd.

"When you come across a kid with a farm background, you get excited," Isler says. "We are biased that farm kids come in with a strong work ethic."

He says although Doty might not seem different than many people who got their start in 4-H and FFA and moved on to other careers, she continues to stand out.

"What makes her special is that she didn't let go of that interest and

passion," Isler says. "She clung to it and turned it into a career she excels at. It's pretty unique to find something you truly care about and do it for a living."

SOME THINGS YOU JUST CAN'T TEACH

When Isler met Doty, it was easy to see she loved animals. In fact, he often teases her that she doesn't get paid to hold baby pigs and talk to the sows. But one can easily see it's her connection with the animals that makes her so special on the farm.

"I don't care if you have experience; I can teach you," Isler says. "What I want to know is that you love animals. I can teach anyone to care for hogs, that's been my life, but truly caring about animals is something you can't teach."





Doty is quick to point out the learning curve was steep. She came in thinking she knew what to expect, but learned the sheer quantity of animals she'd be caring for each day was much different than what she had grown up experiencing on the family farm.

"I knew how hogs functioned and behaved on a very small scale, but when you move to a farrowing house with hundreds of sows to take care of all the time — that was quite different," Doty says. "I knew the basic procedures, but I needed to learn how to manage the scale of everything — to keep it all straight in my head and create a plan and goal for the end of the day every single day."

On her first day, she started in the gestation barn where Isler taught her how to check heat and breed sows.

"Technically, I had bred sows before, but how they did it was completely new to me. I had never checked heat on a large scale. I had never used a boar bot to bring the boar around in front of them. I also had never bred with intra-uterine rods," she says.

She spent the rest of her first week

following Isler, learning how he approaches daily production tasks.

"Learning how to pace myself every day and create a schedule was one of the hardest things to learn," Doty adds.

As farrowing barn manager, her responsibilities include caring for the farrowing house, making sure the sows are settled in and farrowing correctly, and most importantly, attending to the day-zero and day-one litters. She also helps the gestation team as needed. In addition, daily maintenance, cleaning and observing animal health are key parts of her job every day.

The list of jobs is long, Doty admits. That might be what surprised her most about working on a pork operation.

"It's amazing how many things I do in a day — to keep the barn running, to complete the day's tasks and to set myself up for next day," Doty explains. "Most people don't realize how many things there are to do to make the barn run effectively."

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Of all the work Doty does in the barn, farrowing is what she loves most.

"The pigs are the highlight of my day, every day," she says. "If you are having a bad day, pick up a newborn pig and walk around with it for a while. They always make your day better, whether they know they are or not."

As an animal lover himself, Isler says it's easy to see how much Doty enjoys what she does in the barn. He says her passion for pigs is one of the qualities that separates her from other employees who have good work ethic but don't have the drive and passion for animals like she does.

In addition to her passion for animals, Doty is a lead-by-example person, Isler says.

"She is one that will take charge and make things happen. Others around her see that, including myself. A lot of times that is one of the better ways to lead. It's a 'see what I'm doing and try to keep up' mentality," he explains.

On most days, the sow barn is run by Isler, Doty and Hector Zumaya. At times, other employees will come in to help for a day or part of a day when needed. Doty says she feels privileged to work alongside one of the owners.

"It's nice to know the owner has been in your shoes and wants to know every facet of what's going on at the farm. It's such a comfort having an owner who does the job and knows how to do it nearby," Doty says. "I

“The pigs are the highlight of my day, every day ...
They always make your day better whether
they know they're doing it or not.”

know I can call him for anything. Also, I learn every day.”

QUIET WISDOM

There’s no denying working in a barn is stressful. Some days, things don’t go right. Animals get sick. Equipment breaks. Mistakes get made. Doty has learned it’s not good to carry stress from day to day.

No matter the industry, compassion fatigue is a real challenge among caretakers. Doty says animal care is better when employees can take a break from the struggles of the barn.

“When I first started this job, we were going through a bad disease outbreak,” she adds.

“You get fatigued feeling like you can’t do anything and also like you aren’t doing enough. It’s hard to balance that at the end of the day.”

That’s why she has learned going home and forgetting about the barn is key. It allows her to start over the next day with a clean slate, which she says is important to provide the best pig care.

It’s this kind of quiet wisdom coming from 25-year-old Doty that continually impresses Isler. Although she might be a more reserved personality, she’s also not afraid to share her opinion when it’s needed.

“Summer likes to do her thing and go. She has no issues working or talking with other co-workers. She is extremely easy to get along with,” Isler says. “I’ve never had anyone say anything negative about her personal-



Summer Doty doesn’t take it for granted that she has the privilege of working side by side on the sow farm with Islercrest Farms owner Nathan Isler (right).

ity, which is rare when it comes to any work environment.”

Zumaya says she is easy to work with in the barn.

“Summer is always very helpful to me when I need guidance,” he adds. “She always works hard and cares so much about the pigs.”

Doty also has great initiative. She knows what needs to be done and makes it happen. Because of this, Isler says he continues to hand her more and more responsibility on the farm.

“Just like any good employee, her role has evolved,” he says. “She has taken over a lot of the data entry. She also helps train new employees as well. We transitioned over to a new data system after she arrived. She may protest, but I think she secretly likes being in charge of our data. She likes having the records easy to access and she believes in why we do it.”

Doty says it’s important to know a sow’s history when she comes into the farrowing barn. Being able to provide sows extra care if they’ve had problems in the past, knowing past treatments or seeing if they’ve chronically had a

problem, are just a few of many things she looks at that help her perform her job to the best of her ability.

“It would be hard to make informed decisions without the data,” she adds.

WHAT’S NEXT?

People might not realize how rewarding working in a barn with animals can be, Doty says. She has enjoyed jobs in the past, but she never felt like they had payoff at the end of the day. At Islercrest Farms, she says it’s a constant reassurance that she’s done something that matters for the day.

“The work you put in, you see in a day or two. You realize

how it benefits litters days later, and then at 20 days when you send them to the nursery. It’s very gratifying watching them grow up, and then to see what you’ve raised and sent out of the barn,” she says.

Isler hopes Doty never forgets how much she is appreciated. He also hopes people outside of commercial pork production who have an interest in pigs and livestock will consider this rewarding career path.

“There are a lot of kids out there who like showing pigs like Summer did, but maybe they aren’t certain of what opportunities are out there. They may also have an incorrect view of production agriculture,” he says. “I hope Summer’s story opens people’s eyes to the very real impact you could make in agriculture in this career.”

While, Doty wouldn’t call herself a barn hero, those who work with her and see her in action know otherwise.

“I’m not sure if I’m terribly unique,” she adds, “other than it’s something I enjoy and want to do every day.”

However, if you want to give her a cape, she’s not afraid to wear it. 🦸

Do you have a barn hero who goes above and beyond on your operation?

Send nominations to
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Unlock Profit Potential: A Road Map for Pork Industry Resurgence



By Steve Malakowsky

The past 16 months have been tough for nearly everyone involved with the pork industry, particularly producers. Examining Iowa State's "Estimated Returns to Farrow to Finish" profitability chart, along with the multitude of calls and discussions I've had with producers, paints a stark picture of the industry's challenges.

Another significant sign is the financial database, revealing a 10% drop in equity for producers year-over-year by the end of the third quarter of 2023. Although year-end financial

information is pending, it's evident that 2023 remained challenging, adding substantial financial stress to numerous operations.

HOW LONG CAN YOU MITIGATE RISK?

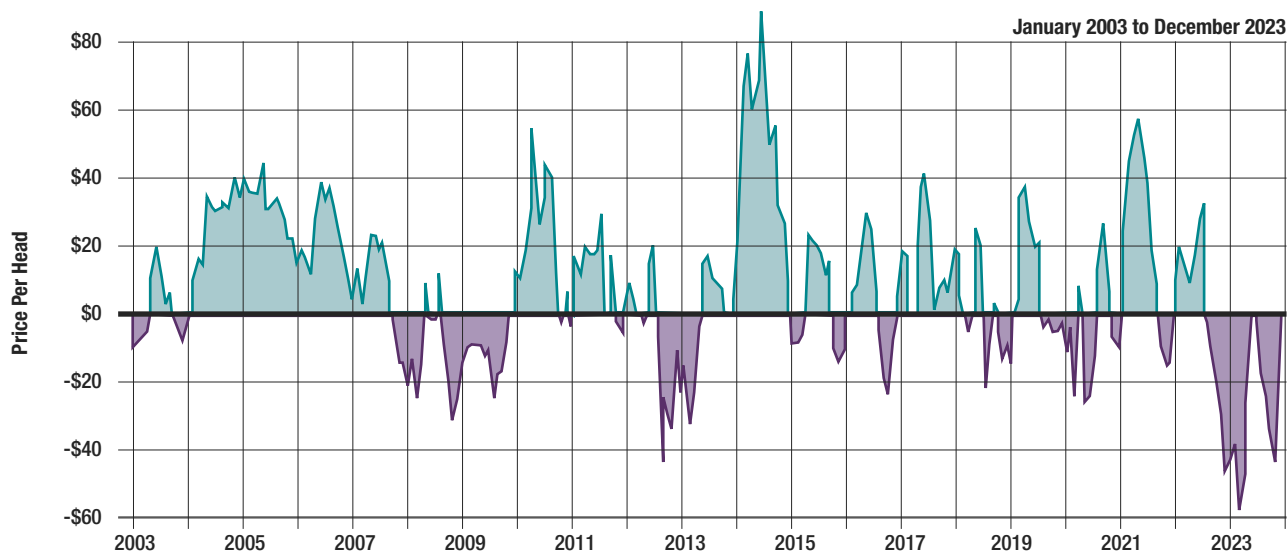
Despite the hardships, there's a glimmer of hope on the horizon. The USDA's December Hogs and Pigs Report indicates a continued reduction in the sow herd farrowings last fall, down 4%. Additionally, the forecast anticipates a continued reduction in the sow herd moving into next May.

Encouragingly, pigs per litter increased by 3.9% year-over-year from the September through

November period, aligning with producers reporting improved production and decreased mortality rates on their farms. Given the available information, what decisions are pork industry owners making to mitigate financial risks?

Monitoring the futures markets since the start of January provides

Estimated Returns to Farrow to Finish, Iowa



This profitability chart from Iowa State University demonstrates just how historically challenging 2023 has been.



a ray of hope, suggesting potential profits in the near future. The June contract has witnessed almost a \$10 per hundredweight (cwt) improvement in price since the beginning of the year, fueled by plummeting grain prices.

This improvement in the hog crush this summer could result in profits ranging from \$30 to \$40 per head, presenting the awaited opportunity. The crucial question owners must ask themselves is whether they can afford to risk missing out on locking in good profits only to see the margins vanish.

ASK YOURSELF THESE VITAL QUESTIONS

Before making decisions, consider a couple questions. First, are you aware of your cost of production in a lower-cost environment? With feed cost reductions, most operations will see a shift from a \$100 per cwt cost to the mid \$80s or lower. As you reduce costs, bear in mind that lower inventory valuations on your balance sheet will offset these savings, affecting earnings. Understanding the cost implications is crucial for

making informed decisions.

Second, engage in a discussion with your lender about your risk management strategy, especially if you plan to use the futures markets to lock in profits. Even if your lender is skeptical, a long-range planning strategy can be an alternative to secure profits. Given the stress on balance sheets over the past 16 months, having your lender on board with your risk management plan is vital for liquidity in handling potential market fluctuations.

With current hog prices, there's hope for rebuilding lost equity in the second quarter of 2024. The question remains: Can you afford to miss out on this opportunity? 🐷



Steve Malakowsky is director of swine lending at Compeer Financial.

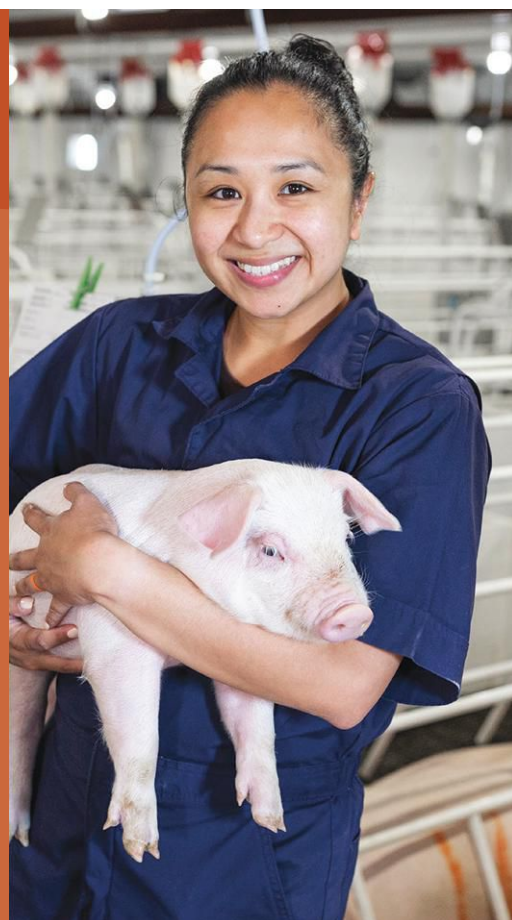


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We Can't Ignore the Real Costs **OF PRRS** Any Longer

By Jennifer Shike

Why is the pork industry living with porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome (PRRS)? Although PRRS incidences look lower so far this year, experts say it's not something to get excited about yet.

"This year is a bit unique," says Pipestone's Cara Haden, DVM. "Instead of living with PRRS, many farms have gone ahead and depopulated and repopulated instead of living with and doing a PRRS elimination. The truth

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

1. WHOLE GENOME SEQUENCING

Diagnosticians have historically looked at ORF5 on the PRRS virus, but that's a small amount of the virus when we just look at ORF5, Haden says. When you look at the entire genome, a PRRS break involves more viruses than first thought – up to four different viruses.

"This is teaching us that we should be managing for more than one virus. Also, the more viruses involved in the break, the longer the time period you need to eliminate this virus," she says.

Research also shows that where two PRRS viruses coexist, they can make a third PRRS virus.

"Next generation sequencing has taught us quite a bit. With better tools, we can make better decisions," Haden says. "As a veterinarian, I love this tool, because I know what's going on now. I can do things if I know what's going on. If I'm in the dark, and I don't realize we have another virus, then I'm not going to act accordingly."

2. NEXT-GENERATION BIOSECURITY

From direct routes (pigs and semen) and indirect routes (mechanical, fomite-based) to aerosol and feed biosecurity, next-generation biosecurity layers prevention protocols under the watchful eyes of trained inspectors and auditors. During a recent study, Scott Dee, emeritus director of research at Pipestone, and his team discovered disease pressure is significantly associated with biosecurity.

"This was a retrospective study – looking back at the data, putting the biosecurity protocols in place and letting the days go by, recording outbreaks as they happened," Dee explains. "For two years in a row, we kept PRRS outbreaks below 10% on average, even with some of the incomplete farms. In 36 years of working with this disease, I've never seen it controlled at that level over that many sites before."





is PRRS is not new, and it is not going to go away on its own.”

This devastating virus is making it challenging for the U.S. to claim to be the “absolute best in the world,” Haden says. For example, Denmark produces 36.8 pigs per sow per year, while the U.S. is at 27.35. When up to 40% of U.S. pig farms break with PRRS every year, that has a real impact on numbers, Haden says.

In addition, the U.S. has the worst

finishing mortality of any of the major swine-producing countries.

“We need to take that very seriously. Being dead last in the world for finishing mortality is not something that the United States swine industry should be proud of,” Haden adds. “The U.S. has a lot of work to do when it comes to PRRS. We have not made a lot of progress in the last 12 years, things have actually gotten worse from a PRRS standpoint.

WHAT IS THE COST OF PRRS?

In 2021, Derald Holtkamp at Iowa State University came out with a study estimating PRRS costs the U.S. pork industry \$664 million a year. Pipestone Management Company recently gathered data and estimated PRRS costs their system about \$200 per sow per year.

“If you’re looking at a 5,000-sow farm, that’s a million dollars just at the sow farm level alone,” Haden says. ➤

The tools in the PRRS toolbox are constantly evolving says Cara Haden, DVM, with Pipestone. She encourages producers to consider how these tools could be put to use on their operation.



3. REGIONAL AND NATIONAL PRRS ELIMINATION PROGRAMS

Haden urges producers to take a closer look at what other nations are doing right as they work toward PRRS elimination. She says there are two important questions to ask. The first is: Do we have the resources in U.S. to do this? Although she argues the industry did not have the resources years ago, there are new resources in place that give her more hope.

“For example, U.S. Swine Health Improvement Plan is an awesome program,” she adds. “We have an established group of professionals and leaders working together to support swine health.”

The other question is do we have enough political will? Do producers want change to happen?

“Swine veterinarians are hungry for disease elimination; we are sick of dealing with the same four diseases and are ready to do something about it,” she says. “But do producers feel the same? Producers are critical to help make regional and national elimination programs work.”



4. PRRS-RESISTANT PIG

Haden is not affiliated with PIC but says she couldn’t discuss new tools in fighting PRRS without bringing up the PRRS-resistant pig. Can we get rid of PRRS from a genetic standpoint?

“The fascinating thing about viruses is they can’t cause disease if they don’t have a place to bind,” she says. “In the pig, we’ve learned that CD163 receptor is where PRRS lands, and once it binds there, it can replicate and cause disease. This group’s gene editing process pulls that gene out so CD163 is no longer there. Now, PRRS has no place to land, so it can’t cause disease.”

Haden believes it’s important for the pork industry to understand the difference between gene editing and genetically modified organisms so they can share that message with consumers.

“We want consumers to trust the pork supply,” she says. “We don’t want them to get confused about genetically modified versus gene editing. Market acceptance is huge to move forward.”

HOW WILL YOU RESPOND?

“On grow-finish, if we look at average daily gain, adjusted feed conversion and percent tops, we are looking at \$13.64 per head for a PRRS-positive group in the finishing base.”

Pipestone estimates the cost of PRRS is closer to \$1 billion a year now.

IT'S MORE THAN MONEY

Economics aside, Haden says there is a very real cost of PRRS when it comes to pigs, people and public perception.

For example, when you go out to the sow barn to feed and no sows get up, that's proof that PRRS is affecting the quality of a sow's life.

“If we're looking at how the pig feels and are trying to tell consumers that we're doing a good job caring for these pigs, PRRS is a really difficult story,” she says.

In addition, the people who care for the pigs are feeling it, too.

“Raising pigs is really fun when pigs are healthy. When we go to the barn and take care of issues, check on the environment, treat a couple of pigs and make sure our pigs are doing good,” Haden says. “It is not fun when we have to drag out dead pigs, inject pigs that are sick, and reshuffle our sort pen because it's full again.”

The next generation is watching, she says. “I talk to a lot of young farmers who say, ‘If this is what it's like, I frankly don't know that I'm interested in doing this for the rest of my career.’”

The public's perception of PRRS is another impact that can't be discounted.

“The public doesn't look at us and go, ‘Oh, these poor farmers, what a tough disease. That's a bummer.’ No, the public looks at it and goes, ‘What are pig farmers doing wrong?’” Haden says. “We have to take this seriously as an industry; 20% of pigs should not die from PRRS.” 🐷

When it comes to fighting PRRS, Pipestone's Cara Haden, DVM, outlines three strategies producers could implement.

STRATEGY 1: Sit and wait.



“Producers can say, ‘Okay, hopefully, there's going to be more tools. Hopefully, this PRRS-resistant pig works. Maybe there will be a better vaccine coming or more research. Let's just wait and see if somebody else can solve our problems in the U.S. pork industry.’ There is promise here, but the sit-on-our-hands-and-wait strategy is not one I recommend,” she says.

STRATEGY 2: Get on board with regionalization and national programs.



“Veterinarians can be excited, and programs can be in place; however, we can't do this if producers are not excited. Producers need to be knocking down the door saying, ‘I'm sick of this, let's get rid of this virus.’ If you want to get rid of it, sign up for regionalization programs in your area if they exist. Show up at meetings. If producers don't engage, it won't happen.”

STRATEGY 3: Focus on what you can do today.



“What are things that producers can do today on the farm? From next-generation biosecurity to whole genome sequencing, there's a lot of low-hanging fruit in this biosecurity area,” Haden says. “Pipestone has proven through research there are things within your control at your farm.”

This is why she believes strategy three is a good place to start.

“We must do something about PRRS. It is imperative for our pigs, for the good of the people who work with our pigs and for public perception of the pork industry,” she explains.

TRADE SHOW TAKEAWAYS

From innovative ideas and encouraging conversations to powerful networking and frank discussions, the 2024 circuit of pork industry meetings and educational conferences has been off to a great start. Here are some of the highlights.



“I think it’s as important today, as any other time in the industry’s history, that we engage with our elected officials and have some conversations.”

Cody McKinley, NPPC vice president of operations and state and national relations, in “NPPC Update” at the Illinois Pork Expo

“We all have a role to play in safeguarding the role of animal agriculture, whether from the farm security angle or public reputation angle. We need to make sure there is nothing happening on farms or plants that we wouldn’t want livestreamed on YouTube or on the front page of the New York Times.”

Hannah Thompson-Weeman, president and CEO of Animal Agriculture Alliance, in “Safeguarding the Future of Pork: Connect, Engage, Protect” at the Ohio Pork Congress



“Before utilizing foreign labor on any visa, think about how the foreign workers will fit in with your work force and who will help them assimilate into work and everyday life here.”

Dianne Bettin, Bettin Consulting in “Labor: How to Attract/Keep Employees” at the Ohio Pork Congress



“We need next-generation traceability. We need to focus on the outcome. We need traceability that is real time. We need accurate data. It needs to be easy and achievable with existing technology.”

Joel Nerem, DVM, Pipestone, in the Howard Dunne Memorial Lecture, “Swine Veterinarians: Who Are We and Where Are We Going?” at the American Association of Swine Veterinarians Annual Meeting



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Subpopulations: Hidden Pockets of Value

By Lance Mulberry and Dennis DiPietre

Here at KnowledgeVentures, the economics of variation has been the cornerstone of our work for many years. While variation has many negative impacts, one of the most economically significant is found in weight at finishing. When a pig falls outside the acceptable range of weight and lean set

by the packer matrix, it receives a penalty to the base price, often called sort loss. By reducing variation at finishing, sort loss is reduced, marketing improved and profits get a much-needed boost.

To be most effective at reducing variation, it's important to consider its causes. Outside of natural genetic variation, the biggest causes are disease, nutrition and human interfer-

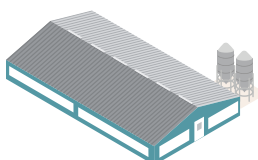
Two subpopulations are shown with their weight distributions at marketing.

SUBPOPULATION 1

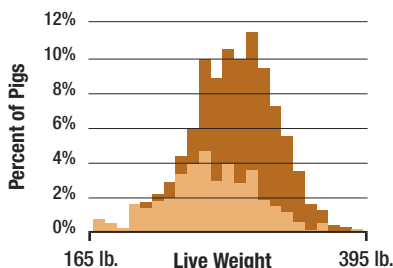
Average: **255 lb.**

Standard Deviation: **40 lb.**

(poor performing)



Farm A

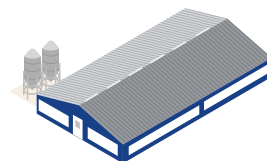


Proportion:

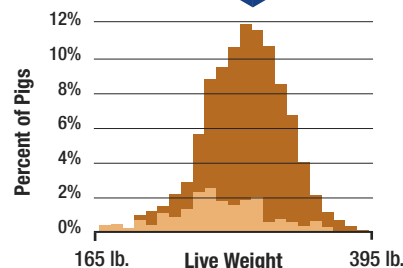
SUBPOPULATION 2

Average: **285 lb.**

Standard Deviation: **30 lb.**



Farm B



Proportion:

Sort Loss: **-\$6.51**

Sale: **\$155.81**

Net: **\$149.30**

Per Head

Difference: **\$3.77**

Sort Loss: **-\$6.17**

Sale: **\$159.24**

Net: **\$153.07**

Farm A has a greater proportion of poor performing Subpopulation 1, perhaps started due to disease and/or feed issues at weaning and nursery and exacerbated in finishing.

Farm B has a significantly smaller Subpopulation 1 present. This results in fewer penalties received and higher average weights, which gives Farm B a superior net value per head.

“

The biggest causes of variation are disease, nutrition and human interference, usually in that order. ”

ence, usually in that order. If we can begin to manage these causes before placement in finishing, we'll increase the positive impact at marketing.

START EARLY

Managing these factors early limits the growth of subpopulations, which are smaller groups within the larger population with distinct performance metrics. The reality, which we all know but is hidden under the averages we see on performance monitors, is that when disease enters the barn not every animal gets sick. Those that do are each impacted differently. The same goes for feed — each animal has a unique response to a ration, meaning there are as many different feed efficiencies as there are pigs.

While current technology limits the monitoring of subpopulations in real time, we can certainly identify them using statistical techniques at finishing and identify the causes of their formation. When this sort of analysis is done in conjunction with a packer matrix, it becomes a simple task to determine the value of limiting subpopulations and promoting homogeneity. This

insight allows us to make corrections for future groups and remedy any systematic problems and do so with the knowledge of cost benefit.

OPPORTUNITY AWAITS

Subpopulation analysis represents a tremendous research opportunity, not just for academic institutions (a hint to any grad students reading this) but for farms and other commercial interests within the industry. Better understanding of subpopulations will allow us to move from one-size-fits-all interventions to more targeted and precise interventions yielding the greatest benefits.

We have seen this happen in crop agriculture, where it's now common practice to apply varied treatments based on what the need for the subpopulation of a field might be. Additionally, when larger farrow-to-finish farms better understand their subpopulations, modifications to the flows of piglets from breeding sites to finishing can be made so that low variation finishing groups can be assembled.

For smaller farms that are either just breeding or finishing, new contracts could be negotiated that move away from typical grading practices toward multiple tiers built around the subpopulations being produced. This would be a win-win situation where breeding farms are rewarded for producing pigs that will be less variable at finishing, and the finishing farm reaps the benefits at marketing.

Once we, as an industry, better understand our subpopulations and move toward precision interventions early in the pigs' lives, we will unlock an untold number of hidden pockets of value. 🐷



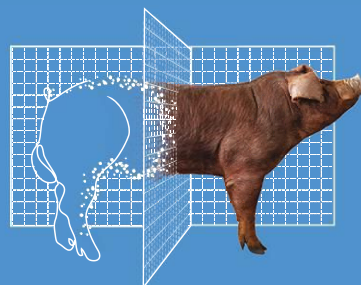
Lance Mulberry (right) and Dennis DiPietre are economists with KnowledgeVentures LLC.



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If You've Got It, Flaunt It

Meet the winners of the Best Beards in the Pork Industry Contest

By Jennifer Shike

What constitutes a great beard? That's a great question. For JoAnn Alumbaugh, one of three judges in the Farm Journal's PORK's Best Beards in the Pork Industry Contest, it wasn't easy to sort as they all "made the cut" so to speak.

"The beard should fit the face and personality of the wearer," explains Alumbaugh, a freelance writer and former editor of Pork Business magazine.

Judge Chip Flory, host of "AgriTalk," put on his chef's apron and matched up beards with his favorite pork cuts in mind. From comments such as "too thinly sliced piece of ham" to "a pork butt of a beard," Chip enjoyed evaluating a competitive group of beards that ranged in length, neatness, color and texture.

Heidi Flory, a Pennsylvania pork producer and 2021 Pennsylvania Elite Ms. United States Agriculture, says in her initial assessment, she looked at symmetry and balance in relation to the shape of the face, how neatly they were trimmed around the mouth, and the evident effort, or lack of, it takes to maintain.

"Is it clean and well-groomed, or does it look like you slipped in the alley this morning after loading out three trucks in excessive temps and skipped the shower," Heidi laughs. "If I were sitting across the table from you at dinner, would I be able to focus on our conversation about all things pork, or would my gaze be locked on the hot bacon dressing lingering on your chin?"

With those things in mind, here's how they lined up the entries. 🐷



"When you get into competition, you've got to be willing to show off what you've got, and this guy is flaunting a whole rack of ribs hanging off his face," Chip says.

The judges remarked on the "au naturale" look, wave and color variation of this beard. Not to mention he could fit in as a member of ZZ Top.

"For me, this was an easy winner," Chip adds. "It's like what the judge says at the county fair: 'This one could have handled more competition.'"

Haupert grew up working on his uncle's hog farm. He's now devoted to showcasing pork during the Iowa State Fair at JR's SouthPork Ranch. He is from Asbury, Iowa, where he is a wildlife technician for DNR. He also helps Berkwood Farms, Blue Ribbon Bacon Festival and the Bacon Ride.

"I nominated The Hopper as he always is up to help various events promoting Iowa pork," says his nominator Brooks Reynolds, founder of the Blue Ribbon Bacon Festival. "He is very generous."

Perhaps what makes this year's winner even more worthy is that he is shaving his beard to help raise money for a children's cancer charity.

"I shaved my beard years ago for a little girl who had cancer. She smiled all the time, through things that would make a grown-up cry," Haupert says. "She was the strongest person I've met. She has since passed, and I want to shave my beard again to help raise money to help fight children's cancer."

BLAKE WARREN



"This fella fell asleep one night in third grade and woke up with a full beard." I like the fullness and how the silver stands out," Heidi says.

"This beard says, 'I've been there' and is utterly unfazed. It has gone from a wild ride on a hog to a beach chair sipping umbrella drinks to watching the grandkids show at the county fair, without every being out of place."

Heidi was a big fan of the second-place beard of Blake Warren's from Newton Grove, N.C. Warren is a sales technician with Hog Slat.

His nominator, David Herring, says, "Blake is not only a dedicated employee, he is an even better person. He always has a great attitude, and his customers and coworkers enjoy his enthusiastic personality everyday."

ADAM ROSS



"Now that's a nice beard!" Alumbaugh says about third-place winner, Adam Ross of Pollocksville, N.C. "It looks fully brushed and seems to fit the wearer's countenance, which says, 'I'm confident, and you don't want to mess with me.' He looks like an outdoorsman, and it's hard to picture him without a beard."

Ross, the sales manager for Advanced Composting in North Carolina, also owns a direct market farm selling beef, pork, eggs, pecans and apples.

Nominator Wayne Barrett of Hanor Company of Wisconsin, says, "Adam is very knowledgeable and helpful in working with us and our compost facilities. He still has his 'mountain' accent. I think he is so deserving."

MATTHEW JEWELL



"Beard 4 is an awesome entry." This is like the winner of a regional whole-hog cook-off competing against the best-of-the-best in Memphis," Chip says of Matthew Jewell's fourth-place beard.

Jewell serves as the rendering supervisor for Prestage Foods of Iowa in Eagle Grove, Iowa.

"We nominated Matthew because he's a really great human and a rendering supervisor who renders a really great beard," says his nominator and colleague Katherine Dornath Cook of Prestage Foods.

MIKE MOTT



"Nothing goes better with bacon than a beautiful beard." The hints of silver add character, and this is a manly-man beard. I had to move him down in ranking because I can't see his eyes, and I'd like to know if his eyes complement his beard," Alumbaugh explains.

Mott is the chief entertainment officer at the Iowa Beer Bus. He also works for the Bacon Ride, a 71-mile bacon-themed bike ride in Waukee, Iowa.

"Mike has been helping promote Iowa pork and bacon from the Iowa Bacon Bowl, Bacon Ride, RAGBRAI and more," says his nominator Brooks Reynolds. "He always rolls up his sleeves and is eager to help out in any way. He also helps many nonprofits by donating his time and money." 🐷



Prepare Now: Focus on Nutrition for Summer Marketing

A common question we hear each May is, “What we can do for summer marketed pigs nutritionally to increase or maintain market weight?” Although it’s a valid question, it needs to be asked in the beginning of the year. It is all about backward math on days to market and what can be achieved economically.

DO WE NEED TO CHANGE DIETS IN THE NURSERY?

Nutritionally, very little can be changed during the first three to four weeks postweaning. These diets are designed to allow pigs to get off to the best start possible.

For 24 to 42 days postweaning, pigs will respond to increased diet energy and growth promoters such as

added copper, in-feed acids, and other additives that have been shown to be fairly consistent in a growth response during this pig age. However, due to the short nature of this period, this often results in very small differences of 0.5 lb. to, at the most, 1.5 lb. However, these practices are done on a routine basis regardless of season.

GROW-FINISH ADJUSTMENTS

The implementation of summer or winter diet programs are more common in grow-finish due to the magnitude of change possible. Each year, the situation of what economically can be done for a summer nutrition program is different. However, the most common concept of increased diet

“ For 24 to 42 days postweaning, pigs will respond to increased diet energy and growth promoters such as added copper, in-feed acids, and other additives. ”



Focus on what you can control, in good or bad economic times. Keep feed efficiency and gain top of mind, particularly when developing a nutrition strategy for summer marketing periods.

energy is by the reduction or removal of lower energy ingredients such as distiller's dried grains with solubles (DDGS) and wheat middlings. Also, in areas of DDGS vomitoxin concerns, this practice directly lowers diet levels which can improve growth. As we replace low energy ingredients with more corn and soybean meal, the diet energy increases.

Historically, added fat has been a practice to increase diet energy, but fat price the past several years has been higher than benefit provided. While fat is much lower in cost than last year, at roughly 40¢ to 45¢ per pound, its economics to improve both feed:gain and carcass weight is still too high to justify its use right now. But this is a consideration to monitor as feed and market prices change.

Feed additives such as copper, an ionophore, acidifiers, direct fed microbials, essential oils, L-carnitine or multienzyme blends can improve gain or feed efficiency. However, when a response is present, it is often a 1% to 2% increase, and the response might not be additive when using multiple additives.

SUMMER DIET IMPLEMENTATION

Consider a 120-day finishing feeding period, pigs marketed on June 1 or later can start on summer strategy diets after Feb. 1. The key is keeping all finishing pigs marketed before the summer marketing period on the non-summer diet program. Just as important to save on feed costs, newly placed finishing pigs in mid-June and after should be fed to non-summer diets as they are marketed in October and later. 🐷

By Joel DeRouchey, Mike Tokach, Jason Woodworth, Bob Goodband, Jordan Gebhardt and Katelyn Gaffield.
Kansas State University

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How Do You Chew?

“I LIKE FOODS THAT I CAN ...

... CHEW.”



CHEWERS

43%

... CRUNCH.”



CRUNCHERS

Percent of
U.S. Chewers

33%

By Anna Dilger

Have you ever had the experience where a friend takes you to their favorite restaurant, raving about a certain dish? But when you try it, it's only okay. You can't figure out what all the fuss is about, and your friend is dumbfounded that you aren't equally excited about it. Many times, one person's favorite food just doesn't taste all that good to someone else.

WHAT IS MOUTH BEHAVIOR?

Why do we, as people, have so many differences when it comes to what foods we like? There are many reasons for these differences. Some are biological like how sensitive our taste buds are to certain flavors, how good our noses are at distinguishing odors and how much spiciness we enjoy. Others are cultural. Prior exposure to certain flavors, textures and forms of food shapes our preferences for the future. But there is one area of preference that has not received as much attention,

especially when it comes to how people enjoy meat: mouth behavior. In other words, how do your teeth and tongue interact with the food in your mouth while you eat it.

Researchers categorize people into four types of eaters based on mouth behavior. These are called: chewers, crunchers, smooshers and suckers. Chewers and crunchers can both be seen flexing their jaws as they eat, but crunchers are after that satisfying

sound of crunchiness while chewers are after that long-lasting chewy sensation. Consider whether you prefer a crunchy granola bar that crumbles as you eat it or a chewy one?

IT'S TIME TO CRACK THE CODE

About 43% of the U.S. population are chewers while 33% are crunchers. Smooshers make up about 16% of the population and will push food around and against the roof of their mouth to break it down. They might prefer soft foods like puddings. Suck-

... SMOOSH, EVEN THE
FOODS I COULD CHEW."



SMOOSHERS

16%

... SUCK ON A LONG TIME
UNTIL THEY DISSOLVE."



SUCKERS

8%

ers tend to prefer juicy and flavorful foods because they will suck on their foods before chewing. Only about 8% of people exhibit this eating type.

So, what does this have to do with meat preferences? Rhonda Miller, professor at Texas A&M University, and her student Kylie Burris, categorized people in terms of mouth behavior and then explored their preferences for different types of hamburgers. Smooshers and suckers were more likely to prefer a burger that was easy to bite through, but chewers and crunchers

desired a more robust texture. Suckers also tended to rate burgers with higher fat content as more seasoned, even though there were no seasonings on the patties. Overall, hamburger thickness was important to crunchers and tenderness was important to chewers, but smooshers and suckers prioritized seasoning and flavor.

This research revealed mouth behavior shaped preferences for hamburgers and would be expected to do the same for other meat products. It's not hard to imagine that people who enjoy

crispy bacon might be more likely to be crunchers. As the pork industry and meat scientists try to crack the code on producing highly desirable pork for consumers to increase the demand for pork products, how mouth behavior shapes consumer perception will be an important consideration. 🐷



.....
Anna Dilger is a professor of meat science at the University of Illinois.



A minute with ... *Kale Causemaker*

By Ella Thome

From 4-H and FFA to judging livestock at Black Hawk College East Campus to working in the swine industry, Kale Causemaker has been in ag for as long as he can remember. His experiences on high school and collegiate livestock judging teams were instrumental in his decision to stay involved in ag. He now serves as the senior director of sales for Innovation Solutions at Kent Nutrition Group.

Causemaker grew up in Henry County, Ill., where his family had a small cow-calf and row-crop operation. "At one time, Henry County was the self-proclaimed hog capital of the world," he says.

He now resides in Geneseo, Ill. He started his career in hog procurement 35 years ago and has been with Innovative Solutions for almost four years.

Read on to learn more about his career, business philosophy and outlook on the pork industry.

Q: What is your why?

A: My why is to discover and get involved in identifying and developing nutritional solutions for pork producers while leading a team that supports these technologies for our customers.

Q: Describe a typical day on the job for you.

A: Every day is a little different, and that makes it fun. Not only do I manage people from a director's position, but I'm also developing a new business model within the organization. If there are two constants, each morning I get caught up with a high-level overview of what is going on in the industry. Second, I regularly check in with our technical manager Dr. Tom Weber to get updates on research projects and product developments. All of this helps me better understand the innovative ways we can help our industry.

Q: How does your company serve its customers?

A: It's simple: We prioritize working with our customers to understand their needs and challenges. As a whole, my company has the capabilities of providing high-quality swine and other animal nutrition to producers. We have 10 manufacturing facilities in the Midwest as well as four plants on the East Coast.

Q: How has the business changed since you started?

A: The industry has changed immensely since I started working at Kent for the first time in 2003. There certainly has been consolidation, and that will likely continue. Most notably, there seems to be more collaboration within the industry between producers and competing companies to work together to find solutions.

Q: Who inspires you?

A: Many people have positively influenced me, whether it's personally or professionally. It's hard to say just one — it is really the pork industry as a whole. The industry motivates me because they are a group of a good, resilient people. They make you want to work hard for them.

HIS TOP PICKS

Favorite Book:
"The Making of
the Manager"
by Julie Zhuo

Vacation Spot:
Sand Pearl
Resort in
Clearwater Beach, Fla.

Hobby:
Working outside on our
14-acre property we bought
during the height of COVID-19.

Sports Team:
I am a Steelers Fan
and have been my
whole life.

Q: What is your business philosophy?

A: If a product or service is not scientifically proven to provide a positive return on investment, then it is not a sustainable solution. It's just that simple. It's not correct to provide a product or service just to make a margin for your company. It must prove positive for the producers, and then it's a win-win.

Q: What are the greatest opportunities in the swine industry?

A: Our greatest opportunity is to improve livability. I don't think anybody's satisfied or proud of the rise in sow mortality that we've seen over the years. Approximately 20% of the pigs don't make it to weaning, and approximately 30% don't make it to market. There's obviously a lot of factors involved there, from genetics to management, even nutrition. It is going to take the industry coming together to solve that. Fortunately, there are already steps in place to do that."

Q: What industry concerns keep you up at night?

A: One of the major concerns now is profitability or lack thereof. We've been through this before as an industry but not sustained this long. 2024 is forecast to be about the same situation for producers. That's a major concern. Another one is the threat of foreign animal disease; it is always on our mind.

Q: What advice do you have for someone who might like to do what you do someday?

A: I would encourage someone who's interested in a career like mine to always prioritize your team's success over your own personal success. If you do that, you're going to maintain a stronger team, maintain more talent, and ultimately that will be the result of your own personal success. Remember it starts with the team.



MORE ONLINE

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read the full
interview.

Q: How is the growing threat of foreign animal disease affecting the U.S. pork industry?

A: "The growing threat of foreign animal disease has certainly heightened our awareness and our preparedness. As a result, we have policies in place to try and keep foreign animal disease out of our country. We have production systems that have bolstered their biosecurity, not just for foreign animal disease, but for other endemic diseases that affect them. Doing these things to be prepared will make the industry as a whole more prepared for a response if the worst case happens." 🐷

Editor's Note: PORK Perspectives is a recurring column that provides business and leadership strategy tips from some of the pork industry's finest.

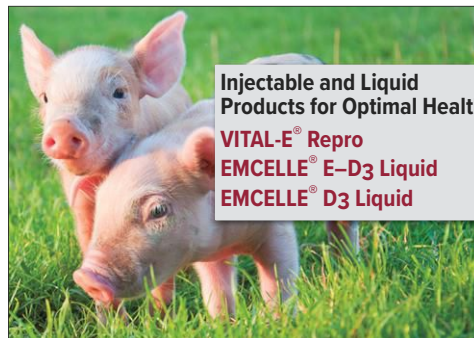
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Unleash Genetic Potential Through Careful Management

By Sam DeHaas

In pig farming, maximizing genetic potential is a constant pursuit. Despite common perceptions that pigs are the “easy part” compared to human challenges, the reality is ensuring optimal conditions for pigs involves overcoming various hurdles. Among the challenges present at your farm, which has the greatest potential to impede performance?

GENETIC POTENTIAL IN PIGS

While renowned athletes like Michael Jordan and LeBron James were not born as NBA players, their inherent athletic abilities were crucial to reaching their worldwide success and fame. Similarly, pigs are born with a maximum genetic potential, which, unlike humans, cannot be improved through practice.

Our impact can only maintain or reduce the genetic potential of the animals in our care. A pig with a lifetime of flawless air, feed, water, care, comfort and health can maintain the maximum genetic potential. Any challenge to these things could reduce the pig's potential. When we place pigs in a barn, we apply pressure on ourselves as caregivers to supply everything for that pig's daily and performance needs.

THE NON-NEGOTIABLES

When we analyze variations in performance among farms with similar genetic lines, caregiver prac-

tices emerge as a key determinant. Despite similar genetic backgrounds, performance discrepancies are attributed to the caregivers' role in ensuring optimal conditions for the pigs. Some might assume newer facilities provide a performance advantage, but when we look closer, it is more important to make improvements to operational execution than focus on facility age.

Proven production practices consistently yield superior results. It is the caregivers' responsibility to promptly address problems in the barn. However, a caregiver cannot do this without proper training to complete a job correctly. Untrained employees will not duplicate excellent performance day after day.

Observation of employee

execution will ensure animals have the appropriate care to reach their genetic potential. Additionally, daily feedback for employees is essential for continued positive results and/or improved behaviors.

The impact of great caregivers minimizes situations that hinder genetic potential, contributing to improved farm efficiency and financial performance.

A financially successful farm juggles the careful management of various factors, from genetic potential to caregiver practices to animal health. At Pipestone Management, we expect our team to provide excellent care consistently to animals, and we audit their performance daily. We challenge you to do the same. 🐷

Pigs are born with a maximum genetic potential, and caregiver practices can either maintain or reduce that potential in the herd.



Sam DeHaas is vice president of production in the East region with Pipestone Management.



AGVIEW'S NEW FEATURE MAKES COMMUTER AGREEMENTS A CINCH



Scan to learn more or sign up for an account.

By Jennifer Shike

A new feature in AgView might be just what you are looking for to save time and be more efficient on the farm. AgView is an opt-in database and dashboard technology funded by the Pork Checkoff that allows producers to securely share location and movement data with their state animal health officials.

The newest feature to AgView is its Swine Production Health Plan Feature — a long title for what's commonly called a commuter agreement.

"In the pork industry, there are a couple ways to get pigs across state lines for feeding. One of those is a health paper, but the other is what's called a Swine Production Health Plan," explains Patrick Webb, DVM, assistant chief veterinarian with National Pork Board.



The plan lays out a mechanism for any producer to work with their herd veterinarian to move pigs within the production system.

Although that might seem fairly simple, implementation is anything but. This is because of the sheer number of people that have to approve it, Webb explains.

"We talked to a lot of users of

AgView on the producer side and on the state vet side, and they said making this process easy in AgView would be a real value," he says.

They piloted the new feature with a producer who has a current plan set up between Ohio and Indiana.

"The fun part was watching the pilot participants use the new feature to simplify a complicated process," Webb says. "Access to real time movements in AgView will always trump spreadsheets in a file related to the speed of a traceback when time is of the essence in a potential FAD outbreak." 🐷

Photo: National Pork Board and the Pork Checkoff



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Employers Pivot Focus to Retention

By Bonnie Johnson

In recent years, agricultural employers consistently emphasized talent acquisition, but there has been a noticeable shift toward prioritizing retention as the primary focus in 2024. Ag and food employers say employee retention is their top human resource concern, according to the AgCareers.com HR Review. This survey offers an annual HR trend analysis specific to the agriculture and food industry.

Retention also emerged as a priority when we inquired about employers' recruitment focus for the upcoming year. In the coming year, the primary goal for agriculture and food employers is to retain the existing talent within their organizations. The most substantial growth in recruitment focuses for 2024 is internal hiring.

Companies reported regular pay increases were the primary tactic for retaining staff. Notably, flexible schedules, remote or hybrid work

“Flexibility in schedules can also reward employees, enabling them to adjust their schedules while meeting the organization's needs.”



options and retention bonuses were top retention strategies that experienced a sizable increase. Many of the strategies employers have used to attract and hire employees in recent years continue to be some of the most effective methods for retaining them.

MOTIVATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Factors that contribute to employee motivation in their roles are also likely to influence employee retention. The top two strategies for keeping employees motivated were bonuses and training and development. A bonus can serve to reinforce and incentivize performance, while training and development are essential to achieve results, providing employees with the tools they need to be successful.

Flexibility in the workplace continues to be key for employee retention as well. Flexibility will differ among

organizations and can hold different meanings for each employee.

Hybrid work arrangements were the most common tactic, allowing employees to spend time in an office and home. Flexibility in schedules can also reward employees, enabling them to adjust their schedules while meeting the organization's needs. Regardless of the type of flexibility, it is crucial to listen to the needs of employees, as this can enhance retention and productivity efforts.

FAIR COMPENSATION

Salary increases were also a key finding from this year's HR Review. In the past several years, companies have experienced market pressures to increase wages at higher-than-normal rates. While employers must remain aligned with market trends to be competitive, the prevalence of higher increases waned compared to last year. In the U.S., the predominant salary increase was over 5%. In 2024, the predominant range reported will be 3.6% to 4%.

Salary surveys, such as AgCareers.com's Compensation Benchmark Review, can arm ag organizations with accurate pay data by ensuring employees are compensated accurately for their duties and responsibilities. Demonstrating to employees that your organization has dedicated time and resources to reviewing company data can boost employee morale and motivation. 🐾



To learn about more human resource trends, download a free copy of the Agriculture and Food HR Review.



Bonnie Johnson is the marketing and communications manager at AgCareers.com.

Whose Team Are They On?

By Abby Kornegay

One of the most common ways farms and facilities are targeted is by unknowingly giving an animal rights extremist access to the property via employment. There are several animal rights groups that hire “investigators” with the sole intention of finding undercover employment at a farm or facility.

Don't wait for an employee issue or other crisis to arise before you act. Here's what you should include on your 2024 hiring checklist:

✓ **Make your application process more formal.** It wasn't long ago that some deals were made with a handshake and a verbal agreement, but it's time to upgrade. It's important to have a written application and a place for applicants to sign off verifying their identity and any claims they made on the application.

✓ **Ask potential employees to consent to a background check.** Your application should ask applicants to consent to a background check. The application should also be signed by the individual applying, authorizing the company to perform said background checks. If they refuse to consent, this should be a red flag.

✓ **Ask the right questions during the interview process.** Make the most of your time face to face with potential employees and ask the right questions. Here are some examples to help you dig deeper:

- ▶ **Why do you want this job?**
- ▶ **What do you do for fun?**
- ▶ **What relevant experience do you have in agriculture?**

✓ **Lean on the experts.** As always, make sure you are working with legal counsel to make sure your hiring process follows all state and local employment laws.

This important work doesn't stop once the hiring process is complete. It's important to make sure your company creates a culture where employee welfare is taken just as seriously as animal welfare. The ag community relies on our employees to help do the important work of raising animals and producing safe, nutritious food. Without help, it wouldn't be possible to do what we do, and animal rights extremists are often searching for vulnerable targets to join their cause and help spread misinformation from the inside. Making sure your employees feel heard, valued and integrated into your farm or company's culture helps make sure we don't give them this opportunity.

Resolve to make yourself a harder target in 2024 by reviewing this checklist and ensuring you're able to confidently tick each item off when it comes to hiring new staff. We also encourage you to attend our 2024 Stakeholders Summit, set for May 8-9 in Kansas City, Mo., where we will dive further into this topic. You can also reach out to the Animal Agriculture Alliance for more resources on hiring and farm and facility security. Lastly, always let the Alliance know if you ever notice suspicious animal rights-related activity in your area. 🐾



Abby Kornegay is the manager of issues and engagement for the Animal Agriculture Alliance.

U.S. PORK EXPORT RECORDS SHATTER IN 2023



Scan to read the full story.

By Jennifer Shike

Exports were a shining star for U.S. pork in 2023, says Courtney Knupp, National Pork Board's vice president of international market development. With the market dynamics at play, that means a lot to a U.S. pork producer's bottom line.

"Almost 30% of our production in 2023 went into international markets. That's just shy of about \$65 contributed to the price of a pig that comes from the value and results of our exports," Knupp explains.

U.S. pork exports surged in December 2023, contributing to a record-breaking year. Export value set a record at \$8.16 billion, up 6% while export volume totaled 2.907 million metric tons, up 8% from 2022.

"We are keeping our eye on our southern competitor and focusing resources to combat their presence."

Regardless of how you crunch the numbers, 2023's success shows the strategy to diversify and differentiate export markets, and U.S. pork ensures the industry goal to sell every part of the pig at the highest value is working.

Exports to Mexico produced record-breaking figures in both volume and value, standing out as a key market once again. About \$2.35 billion of U.S. pork was sold into Mexico, just over 28% of total exports from a value perspective.

The U.S. also saw an uptick in sales to the Western Hemisphere, inclusive of the Central American countries, the Dominican Republic and Colombia. But even more promising is what's taking place in the Asia-Pacific region.

"We've been at a disadvantage from a price and market access standpoint, but with the European Union's contraction and spread of African swine fever in the region impacting domestic supplies, it's giving us opportunities to capture more market share in key countries like Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Vietnam," Knupp says.

WHAT ABOUT BRAZIL AND CHINA?

Brazil is growing as a competitor in the global market, increasing pork production and exporting more pork.

"We're focusing on creating a differentiated brand for U.S. pork, realizing Brazil is present in a lot of our markets in Asia and creeping into the Western Hemisphere," Knupp adds. "We are keeping our eye on our southern competitor and focusing resources to combat their presence."

USMEF's focus on creating value beyond price with relationships is a key differentiator from Brazil, she says.

"Brazil is strong in price-oriented markets. The Brazilians have a lower cost of production largely due to availability of labor, which is a challenge in our market," Knupp says.

The Brazilians are showing up in strength in Asia. They send a large percentage of their exports to China. For the U.S., China remains the No. 1 purchaser of U.S. pork variety meats – 2023 shipments valued at \$850 million.

"China's a unique market," Knupp says. "It is a Top 5 market for our exports, but it is inconsistent from year to year due to a number of factors beyond our control." 🐷



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Post-Weaning Scours: No One-Size-Fits-All Solution

By Amy Maschhoff

Post-weaning scours is a big topic of discussion.

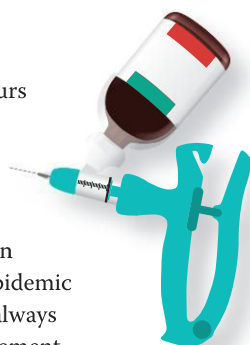
For a production system with commingled sow farms, even with like-genetic and epidemic disease status, there is always opportunity for improvement.

At times, it's easy to approach post-weaning scours in a large system from a one-size-fits-all approach. However, in the past few years, the Maschhoffs health and animal care team has started taking a customized regional and flow approach, an internal term for commingled sow farm wean pigs.

TRY A NEW APPROACH

Historically, we have standardized the approach for prefarrow enteric vaccines and used one master vaccine across the system, applying this standard to farms in several locations and regions. To simplify protocols and capture pricing benefits, the health team took a surface-level approach, underutilizing the knowledge our team and industry had regarding enteric pathogens.

Continued advancement of diagnostic technologies and techniques have allowed our herd veterinarians the opportunity to drill down into their specific farm and flow needs. Through collaborations with pharmaceutical companies and diagnostic labs, the health team has been able to better understand the disease on the surface



while using sequencing and typing to protect against specific strains of enteric diseases. This better sets up passive immunity and gut health for piglets within a farm and flow.

For example, instead of using a commercial vaccine or master system prescription vaccine selection based on one type of rotavirus, veterinarians have taken a more targeted approach over the past year and requested sequencing to understand the capsid proteins and farm-specific rotavirus strains. Our vaccines are now more specific and increase chances of improved cross protection.

SEEK CONSTANT IMPROVEMENT

Rotavirus isn't the only pathogen that the herd veterinarians have been typing by flow. With three major production operating regions, each of our veterinarians have had the opportunity to prioritize the specific challenging strains of *E. coli* by examining fimbrial types and specific virulence factors.

There are complexities and advantages of this customized approach to prefarrow vaccines. Change in any large system requires communication. It also took collaboration with our procurement teams to ensure our internal ordering system was prepped with proper regional vaccine names so managers could find their farm and flow specific vaccines easily. Our animal care team diligently updated work instruction tools for farm staff to use with images indicating new labels for product changes on-farm, too.

The flexibility of this approach will be a great improvement moving forward. As sow farms move in and out of a flow due to genetic changes, epidemic disease, housing systems and other changes, the health team will have greater ability to lift and shift prefarrow vaccination approaches to match the specific farm and flow needs at certain points in time.

Though vaccines are one tool in the toolbox for managing enteric disease challenges, our team is encouraged to continue to improve our processes to better pig health and performance. 🐷



Amy Maschhoff is the director of health and animal care for The Maschhoffs.

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Embracing Our Differences for Strength

Lori Stevermer is a pork producer from Easton, Minn., and serves as president of the National Pork Producers Council.

“There are endless opportunities to speak up for our industry. Let’s embrace our individual differences to elevate how others perceive pork production.”

By Lori Stevermer

My daughter recently reminded me of some advice I had given her growing up. Recognizing International Women’s Day and the contributions that women and other individuals with different backgrounds, experiences and mindsets have brought to our lives was a fitting way to kick off my term as the new National Pork Producers Council president on March 8.

“Don’t be afraid to be the only person like yourself in the room.”

That’s the advice my daughter, Beth, played back to me as I headed to the National Pork Industry Forum. That mindset prepared me for so many roles in my life, and it has application for the future of the pork industry.

LOOK BEYOND TRADITION

When I left my family farm to take my first job in sales with Wayne Feeds, it was not uncommon to be the only female in the room. It was my passion for agriculture and professional skills that ultimately broke down any barriers. It’s why I feel so strongly about encouraging others to be confident in what they do and bring value to their roles and to celebrate all the unique qualities people offer.

But when it comes to attracting more individuals to agriculture, the odds are stacked against us. If all the kids who grew up on a farm pursued a role in agriculture, we still would not have enough people to run our farms or agribusinesses. That’s why we need to look beyond traditional

candidates to find those who have an interest in agriculture and help foster that into a career. That could mean mentoring a 4-H participant or identifying someone who likes animals and might have grown up in a city to consider a career in agriculture. Let’s be a resource and open doors to what agriculture has to offer.

CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES

The pork industry has changed, both in its business structure and the makeup of its membership. One outcome from that is having more women involved in running our farms, being active on committees and industry boards and even leading state organizations. That diversity of perspectives is important as we think about the impact we can all have when we promote pork production. Whether it’s serving on state associations, visiting with local county commissioners, or talking to a child’s class, it starts with finding a career you enjoy and sharing that passion.

A wider range of voices will also help promote our industry to an increasingly diverse audience. What is familiar to us might be new to an individual who has no connection to ag. I’ve had the privilege of speaking to audiences from the Minnesota State Fair to Grandma’s Marathon all the way to Capitol Hill. Each time, I work to uncover values we have in common. There are endless opportunities to speak up for our industry. Let’s embrace our individual differences to elevate how others perceive pork production. The differences we all bring should be celebrated as a strength of our industry. 🐷

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PIG FARMERS CHANGING LIVES ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Meet Two Pork Industry Leaders

By Jennifer Shike



Cheryl Cowser Walsh,
Illinois Pork Producers
Association president
Princeville, Ill.

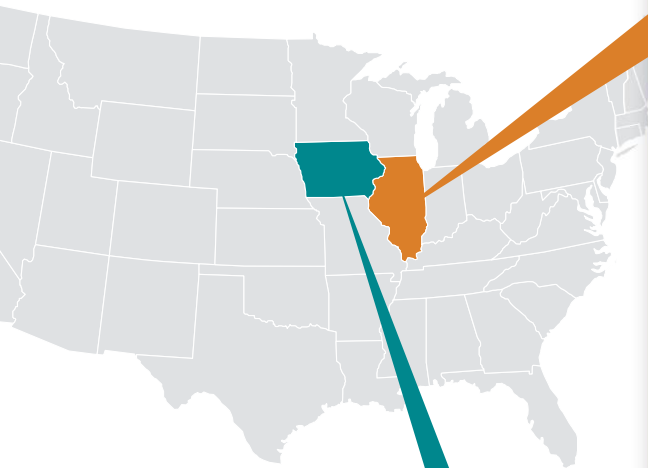


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In 2011, Cheryl Cowser Walsh, a fourth-generation pig farmer from Princeville, Ill., agreed to take a young pig into the classroom as part of the Illinois Farm Bureau's Ag in the Classroom program. Little did she know that her "yes" would turn into visiting more than 1,000 classrooms over the next decade.

With all the demands of her farm pulling her in multiple directions each day, it's hard to believe she could find the time to visit classroom upon classroom to talk about pigs. But her why is clear.

"I do it because most of these kids have never seen a live pig before," Walsh says. "They don't realize this is where their bacon comes from. Most of these kids go to school three to four blocks from their home and rarely go into a grocery store. I want to help them understand where their bacon comes from, and the important role farmers play in making that possible."



Matt Gent,
Iowa Pork Producers
Association president
Wellman, Iowa

**"It is no secret
that our industry
is changing."**

For as long as he can remember, Matt Gent has wanted to be a pig farmer. In fact, he loved farming so much that he gave up on high school sports because he wanted to get home sooner to help his dad on the farm.

"I've never looked back since," Gent says. "I'm the third generation on our family pig farm, and the fourth generation is coming."

There's no denying Gent's passion for raising pigs is why this pork producer stepped up to the challenge of being the new president of the Iowa Pork Producers Association.

"It is no secret that our industry is changing, and as an organization we need to adapt to the needs of our producers and consumers," Gent adds.



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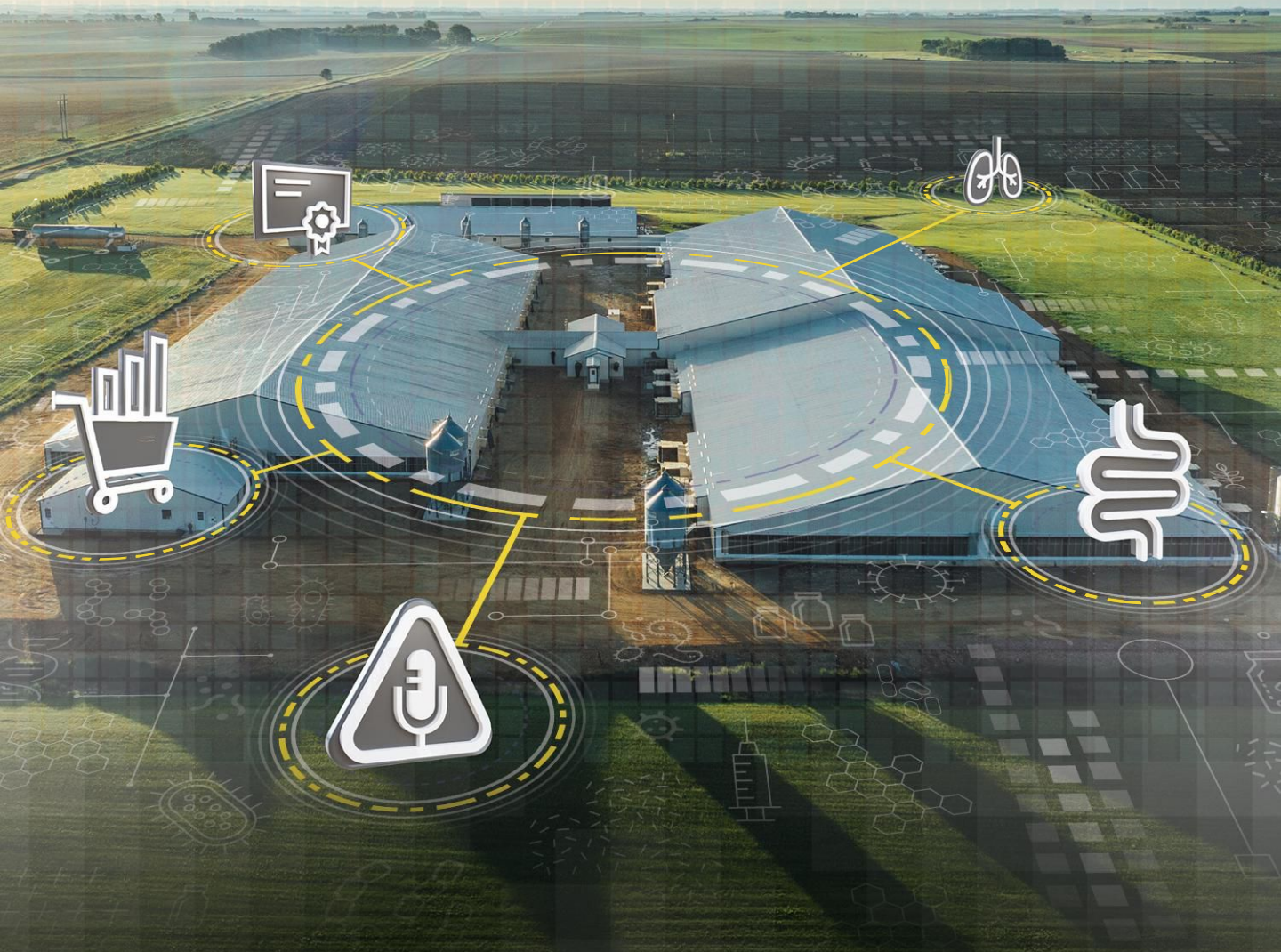
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